

Folklife in *A Nation of Nations*

Robert H. Byington



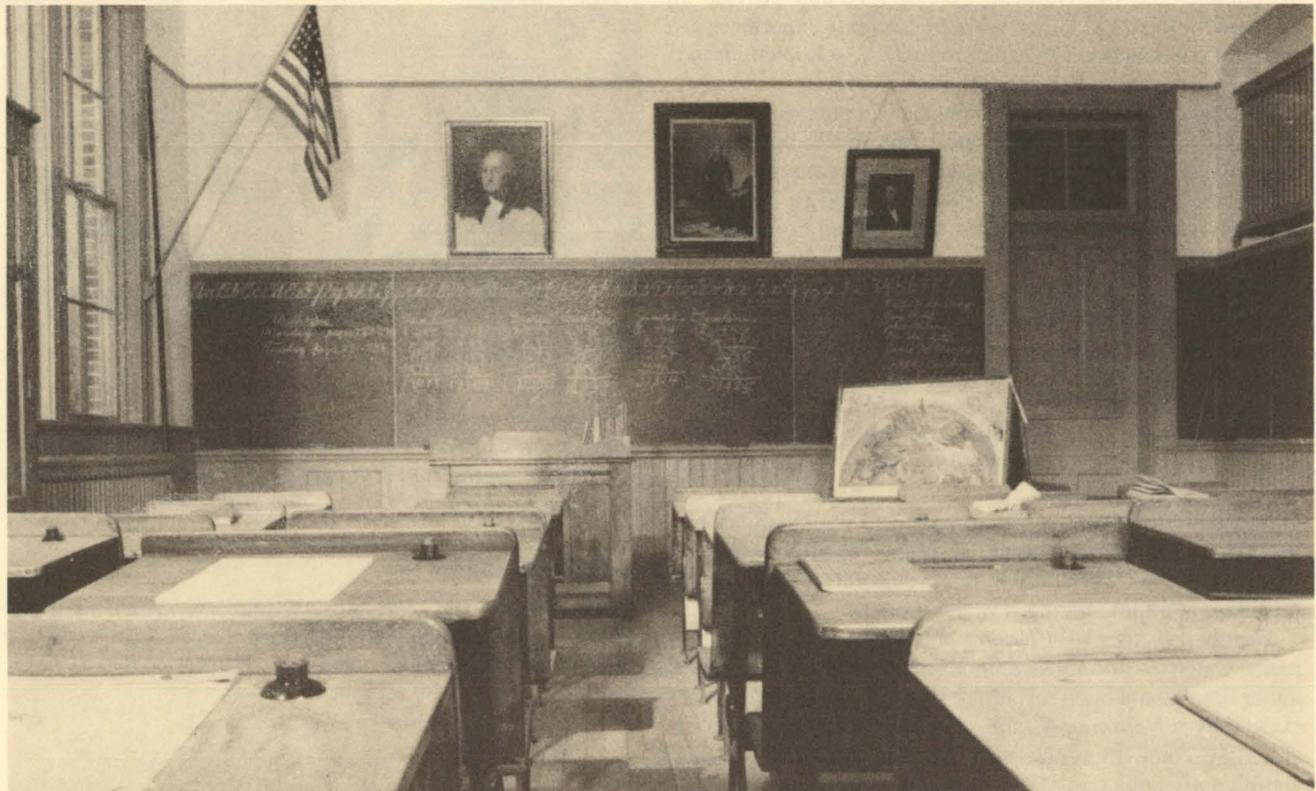
A Nation of Nations is the largest single exhibition ever mounted in the National Museum of History and Technology. It takes a mighty exhibit to express a mighty theme. *A Nation of Nations*, through three-dimensional objects, shows how various people the world over came to America, what they brought with them, how experiences in the new land shaped their traditional material culture, and how objects and machines that they made here helped them cope with their new environment and express their values.

The objects, accompanying signs, and text panels of the exhibition convey information and evoke for the visitors recollections of their personal experiences in America. An-

Mrs. Lillian M. Fifield (the student with a check) was photographed in 1913 with Dunham School's 7th and 8th grades. When she posed with her graduating class, her hair was styled in a then-popular pompadour. Her family lived in New York City on 70th St., near Lexington Ave., and her father was a blacksmith for the Cleveland Hardware Co. Like many people in the neighborhood, her parents were German immigrants. Lillian and her sister first learned English in school and taught it to their mother.

Robert H. Byington is Deputy Director of the Folklife Program at the Smithsonian Institution.

Classroom 201 of Cleveland's Dunham Elementary School is now part of A Nation of Nations in the National Museum of History and Technology. Here former students and staff share their experiences with young Washington, D.C., students in a "living" exhibition at the Festival.



other effect, almost a cultural drama, is achieved when people participate in a "living" exhibit which combines artifacts and demonstrations. In this way folklife—lore and behavior—can be presented side by side with physical objects to enrich the exhibit. During the Folklife Festival participants giving demonstrations and narrations in several areas of *A Nation of Nations* help create this kind of living, personalized exhibit.

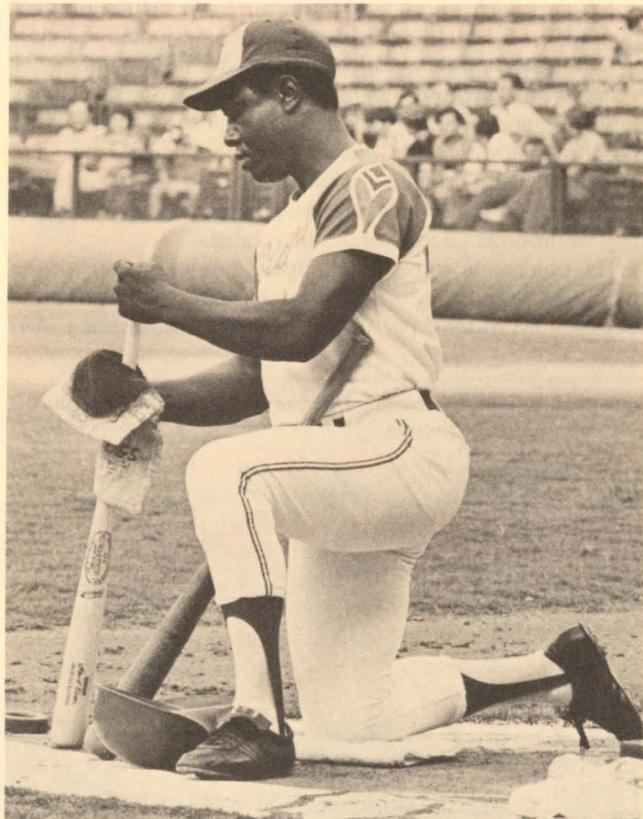
A Nation of Nations is an elaborate combination of physical artifacts and folklife; it also demonstrates the effect of physical environments on social interaction. For example, the meticulously replicated classroom from Cleveland, Ohio, is brought to life again by former pupils and teachers who regale visitors with anecdotes of school activities—the games and tricks as well as serious academic achievements. To complement the Dunham School folk and provide an intergenerational exchange of public-school experiences, a group of contemporary Washington, D.C., schoolchildren is also participating in the exhibit.

The classroom exemplifies a physical context for the presentation of folklife. But folk expression can also be presented in symbolic frames, as with narratives, for example. Immigrants speaking of their experiences—at Ellis Island and beyond—will be featured in the Ellis Island corner of the exhibit.

Other objects in *A Nation of Nations*, by themselves self-sustaining and effective examples of material culture, are enhanced by conjunction with living culture. The aura of baseball surrounding the worker from Hillerich and Bradsby is imparted to his movements as he deftly hand-turns a "blank" to fashion the famous "Louisville Slugger"® bats. This lends immediacy and actuality to the world evoked by the physical memorabilia.

In much the same way, narratives and explanations of a veteran of the pencil-making industry reveal his esoteric work conditions while supplying a cultural context for the machine, and humanizing it in the process.

Whether visitors to *A Nation of Nations* listen to participants, watch traditional techniques of ethnic food preparation under flamboyant neon restaurant signs, or recount memories evoked by *A Nation of Nations* to family folklore interviewers, they come in touch with relevant forms of folklife, significantly enhancing their museum experience.



Hank Aaron, a baseball great, is shown with a "Louisville Slugger"® baseball bat. To complement A Nation of Nations, craft demonstrations including baseball-bat turning are held. Experts from Hillerich and Bradsby, makers of the "Louisville Slugger"® are on hand during the Festival.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Marzio, Peter C., Ed. *A Nation of Nations: The People Who Came to America as Seen Through Objects and Documents Exhibited at the Smithsonian Institution*. New York: Harper and Row, 1976.